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THE BEEF SUPPLY CHAIN: FROM FARM TO THE TABLE

The U.S. cattle industry is comprised of more than 1 million individual farms or ranches that provide the nation with steady supply of safe, nutritious beef. Each year cattle producers market 35 million cattle that are eventually harvested for food. Currently in the United States, there are 700 major feedlot operations that own approximately 2,100 feedlots with one-time capacity of 1,000 or more and 64 major beef packing operations processing approximately 26 billion pounds of beef annually.

There are four primary segments in cattle production: cow/calf operator, stocker operator, feedlot operator, and packer/processor. The process begins with the cow/calf operators and finishes with the consumer. The cow/calf operators are producers who raise cattle that produce calves and feeder cattle that grow and are shipped to stocker operators and feedlots. Santa Rosa County is considered to be a cow/calf county. We have approximately 226 beef cattle producers. Herd sizes range from one brood cow to 250 brood cows. The average herd size is 35 head. The calves that are produced remain with the brood cow until they reach seven months of age. Once the calves have matured they are sold to the stocker operator. The stocker operator will put additional weight on the calves before they go into feedlots. The feedlot operators buy cattle and then finish growing them in feedlots for market. After reaching the required weight, cattle are sold to a packer for harvesting. The packer/processor buys cattle from the feedlot for slaughter and processing. They in turn sell the further processed carcasses as boxed beef to retailers and food service operators who will further process or prepare it for consumption by consumers.

Today, beef is one of the most carefully inspected foods available to consumers. Nine federal agencies are responsible for ensuring that meat presented to consumers is wholesome and safe. The agency with the largest role in meat production is the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA-FSIS). USDA-FSIS administers a comprehensive system of inspection regulations ensuring that meat products intended for human consumption are wholesome and accurately labeled.

There are seven grades of beef, but only three are used primarily for marketing: PRIME, CHOICE, AND SELECT. Quality grades are assigned to beef carcasses by USDA officials based on relationships between marbling and the age of an animal. Marbling is the specks of fat dispersed within the muscle.

PRIME meat comes from young animals with at least slightly abundant marbling. CHOICE meat comes from young animals with moderate, modest or small marbling and SELECT comes from young animals with slight marbling.

The most recent changes in beef carcass grade standards occurred in 1987 when the name GOOD was changed to SELECT to better reflect consumer attitudes and perceptions. Additionally, yield and quality grades were uncoupled so that all graded carcasses did not have to be graded for both yield and quality. The yield grade is a number linked to the quantity of meat on the carcass.

Cattlemen are constantly listening to consumers and are changing breeding and feeding practices to reflect consumer demands. For example, there has been substantial improvement in the ratio of lean to fat in cattle during the past 10 years. As a result, the same amount of beef can be produced from 10 percent fewer cattle than a decade ago.

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